Jeet Kune Do's Fencing Connection

Bruce Lee Follows a Family Tradition

By David Scyster

While swordplay was taught and practiced as lòng ago as the time of the Egyptian pharaohs, our oldest surviving manuals on the art date only from the mid-1500s. The principles and concepts described in those volumes, however, are the same taught in fencing classes today. As a combat art, fencing has passed the test of time. This fact, along with a brother who was a champion in the sport, attracted Bruce Lee to study and explore fencing. He supplemented his own experience with the books written by the swordsmen who have shaped our understanding of fencing as both a sport and a martial discipline. Lee's research and personal experience allowed him to draw from fencing the ideas, concepts and principles universal to fighting. The threads of this learning, as part of a lifetime of martial exploration, would weave a tapestry called jeet kune do.

JKD is not a collection of techniques, or a style of fighting. Rather, it is an understanding and employment of the principles of combat, the concepts of fighting, and the ideas of attack and defense. It is also a pathway by which Bruce Lee sought, through the crucible of discipline and combat, to unfold his awareness and understanding at physical, emotional, mental and spiritual levels.

The major ideas translated from fencing to JKD include use of the feint, parry, riposte, attack on the preparation, and simple and compound attacks.

Feints

A feint is an attack that appears so realistic it must be answered. The key is that the feint is not the real attack. Rather, it is an action designed to draw an opponent from his balanced, on-guard position and into a position from which he will be unable to defeat the real attack, which is following hot-on-the-heels of the feint.

Fencers divide their target into four quadrants, or "lines" in fencing terminology. These are "high inside," "high outside," "low inside," "low outside." A feint threatens one of these, and, as the opponent defends that line, the attacker changes line and delivers the attack elsewhere.

For example, a fencer may feint "high inside." His adversary's blade moves to cover that line (a parry, discussed later). As the defender executes the parry, the attacker moves his blade and point just enough to deliver the attack elsewhere, perhaps "low inside."

The possibilities are many:

High Inside	High Outside Low Inside Low Outside
High Outside	High Inside Low Inside Low Outside
Low Inside	High Inside High Outside Low Outside
Low Outside	High Inside High Outside Low Inside

In practice, less is better. One feint is more powerful than two, as it allows no time for the opponent to slip in a quick action of his own and usurp control of the action. This would be an "attack on the preparation."

In fencing, a feint is performed with the blade of the weapon. For a JKD fighter, the body is a weapon, so consider the multiplicity of tools. A feint may be executed with the hand, head, arm, leg, eyes, even the attitude, while the true attack is delivered with another weapon. As the weapons grow in number, so do the chances for stealth and deception.

Learning to feint well offers many advantages. A realistic feint must be answered. If not, since its action is moving toward a vital target, an unanswered feint simply becomes a real attack. More importantly, a fighter who can feint effectively sets the pace of the contest; he controls the opponent by making him respond over and over without giving him the chance to launch an offensive of his own.

Lee felt so strongly about the value of feints that in the *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, he states,

> *"Good feints are decisive, expressive, and threatening, and one can say that JKD is built on feints and the actions connected with them."*

The Parry

Fencing is a linear sport, the action back and forth on a strip no wider than 78 inches. It is a lead-hand game. The rear hand is only used for balance. The action of defeating incoming attacks is done with the blade of your weapon. There are three areas of a fencing blade. The third nearest the point is the "foible," or "weak;" the middle third is the medium; and the third nearest the guard is the "forte," or "strong." Proper parries pit the forte of the defending blade against the foible of the attacking blade, or strong against weak.

A fencer is taught two distinct styles of parries. One style is a holding parry, which arrests the attack by holding the opponent's blade. Another style is a spanking parry, which is a deflecting action used to redirect the energy and trajectory of the incoming weapon. Parries don't require much force, and only need to move the weapon a little. An inch off target is as good as a mile.

Those who remain with fencing quickly learn the spanking parry usually is the

Lead photo by Roger Ball

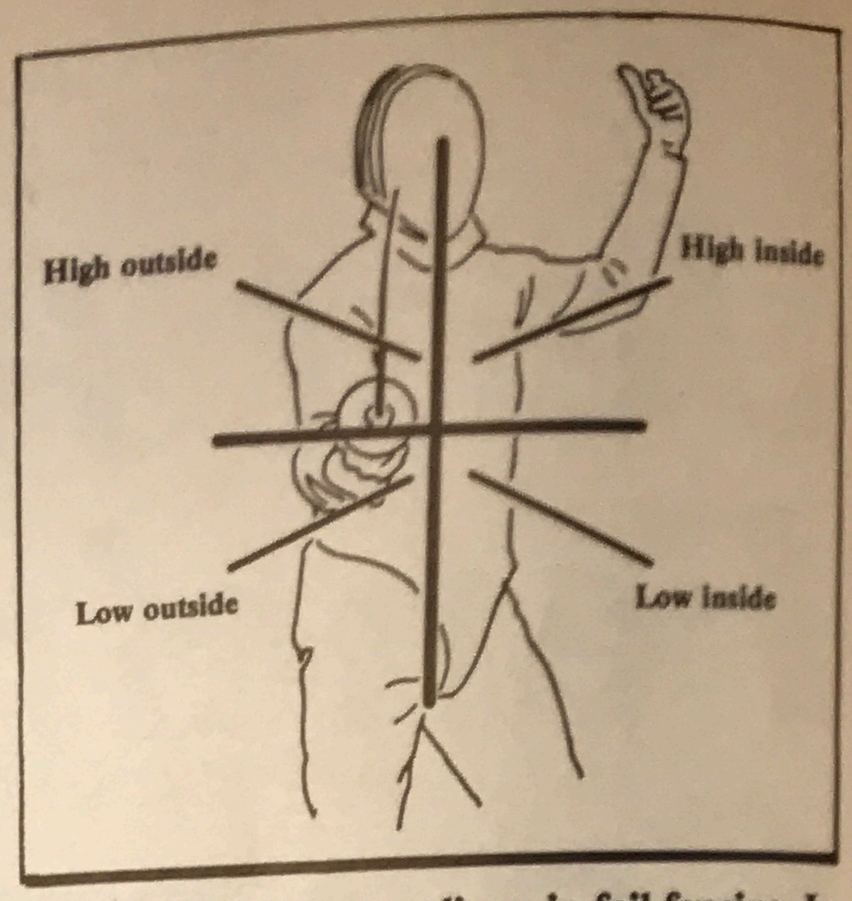
winning stroke. This parry does not halt the action; fencing, like all fighting styles, is a flow of energy.

Bruce favored the use of parries instead of blocking for defense. He states his reasons in the *Tao:*

"Parrying is more refined than blocking which uses force and causes contusion of the tissues, nerves, and bones. Blocking should only be used when it is necessary because it weakens, rather than conserves bodily force."

Bruce saw the use of the parry through the eyes of a fencer:

"The object of the parry is to use just enough deflecting motion to protect the threatened area."



The four quadrants, or lines, in foil fencing. In jeet kune do, these lines encompass the entire body.

Bruce also pointed to the need for employing the parry at the proper moment:

"A blow is never parried until the last moment and always when close to the body."

This last bit of advice confuses many students, but the need to hold the parry until the last possible instant determines what is a real attack. Parrying too soon opens up the defender to being picked apart by good feints and places him in a position of not being able to stop an actual attack.

"A fighter who can successfully attack on his opponent's preparation takes control of the bout. He disrupts his adversary's timing and shakes his confidence."

Riposte

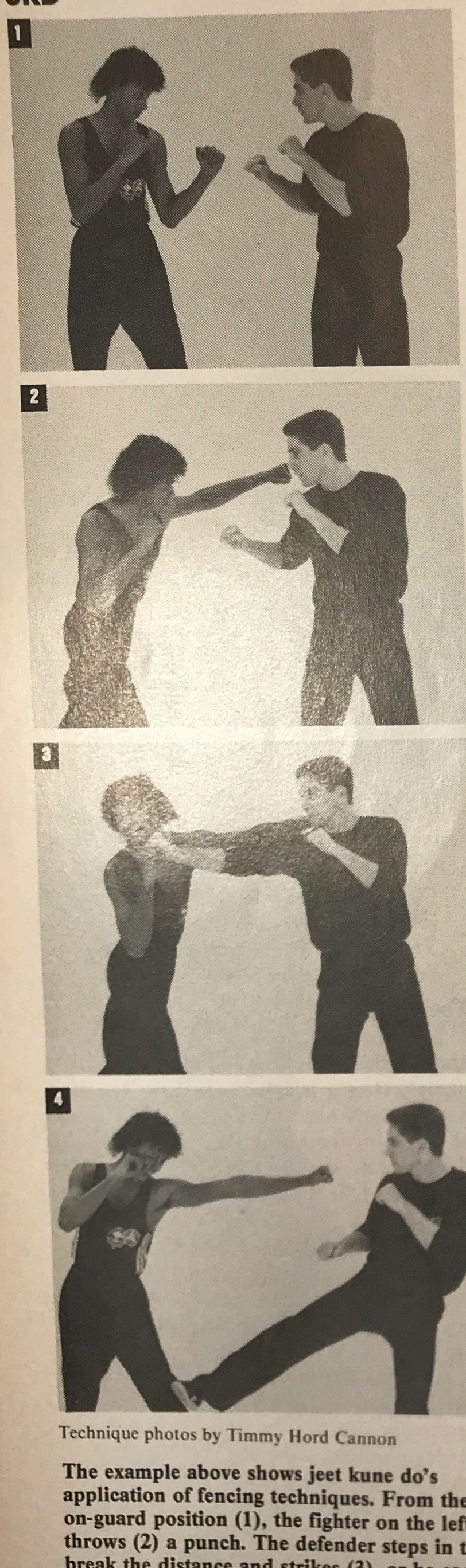
The parry stops the attack, and is followed by the defender taking the offensive. This action is a riposte. In a fencing phrase, offense and defense may change hands several times in the space of seconds. It is attack/parry/riposte/counter-riposte/counter-riposte until a point is scored or the rules stop the action (crossing a boundary or damage to a weapon, for example).

Lee's fighting heart understood this and it led him away from classical block-and-punch tactics.

"A parry and riposte are most effective if made as the attack is completing its course. At this point the time available to the opponent to change from attack to defense is cut to the minimum. Consequently, the riposte has the best chance to succeed before the attacker can parry it."

The parry-riposte also helps the fencer gain valuable time on an opponent. "Time" involves the pace of a fight. Combining a defensive action with an offensive strike

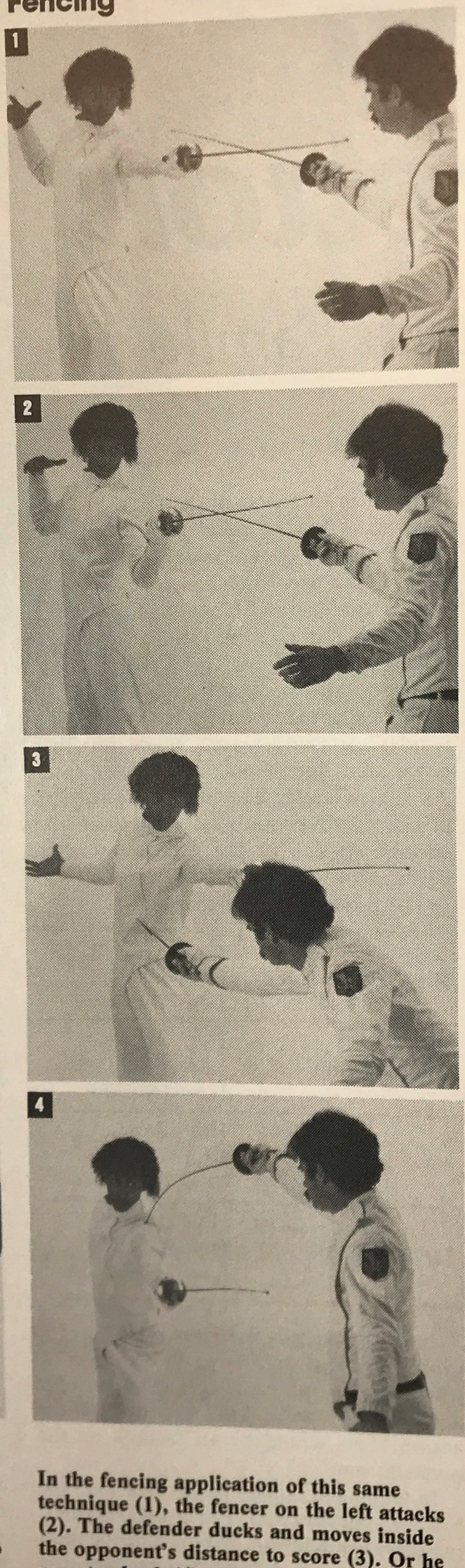
JKD



Technique photos by Timmy Hord Cannon

The example above shows jeet kune do's application of fencing techniques. From the on-guard position (1), the fighter on the left throws (2) a punch. The defender steps in to break the distance and strikes (3), or he can step back (4) and strike with a long-range weapon.

Fencing



In the fencing application of this same technique (1), the fencer on the left attacks (2). The defender ducks and moves inside the opponent's distance to score (3). Or he can step back (4) to break the opponent's distance, and reach over to score on the shoulder.

represents efficiency, and allows time to be gained over the opponent. "Getting there first with the most," as Jeb Stuart said. Bruce Lee found such actions to be an integral part of fencing strategy.

While these "timed" actions require exceptional timing and bout sense, they are devastating when properly employed. Both combine the defensive parry and the offensive riposte into one motion. Lee translated this into JKD through wing chun's trapping hands.

Preparation of Attack
Attack on the Preparation

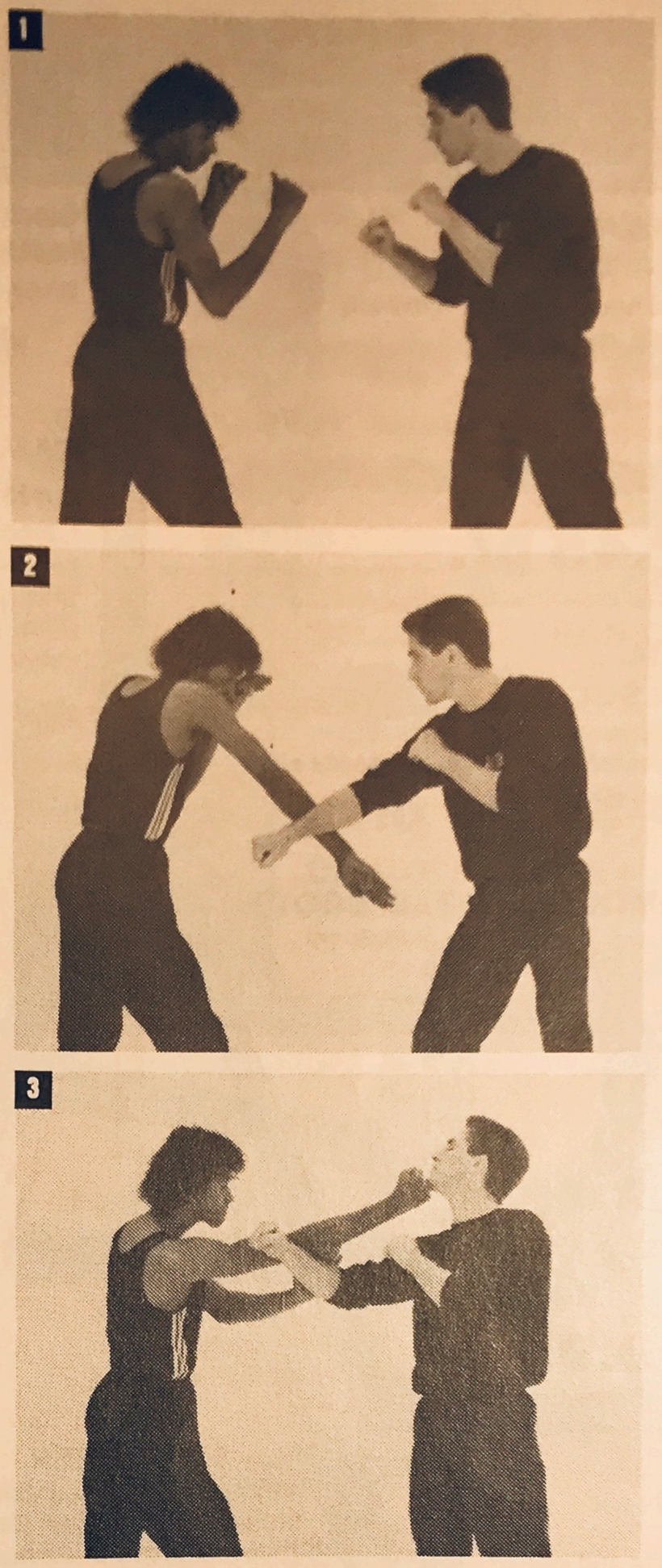
Choosing the specific stroke and site of the delivery in the initial attack or as a riposte is a decision dictated largely by the nature and skill of the opponent. If the adversary is slow, untrained, unprepared or undisciplined, he may be taken with a simple, straight action. But one more skilled must be deceived to gain time and an opening. With feints and false attacks, an opponent can be drawn out of his ready, on-guard position, caused to lose balance and control, and then be successfully attacked and defeated.

> *"If you wish to make use of any form of attack, the opponent's habits and preferences must be observed. Success in simple attacks, direct or indirect, lie in correct selection. The attack must correspond to whatever movement is being made by the adversary. Thus, it is dangerous to attack with just anything that comes to mind."*
>
> **— Bruce Lee**

If attacked "high inside," and assuming a successful parry has been made, a natural reaction is to riposte "high inside." A better choice might be to riposte "low outside." This action calls for the development of keen point control, footwork, and eye-hand coordination. In JKD, where the body is a tool, changing line becomes almost unlimited. A punch in high line may be parried and answered by a kick in low line. A low feint may be followed by a high punch. Thinking and acting to gain the upper hand constitutes "preparation of attack," while the flip side is "attacking on the preparation." This is a counteraction, and, when properly executed, gains time on the attacker by slipping through his preparatory actions to score against a good target.

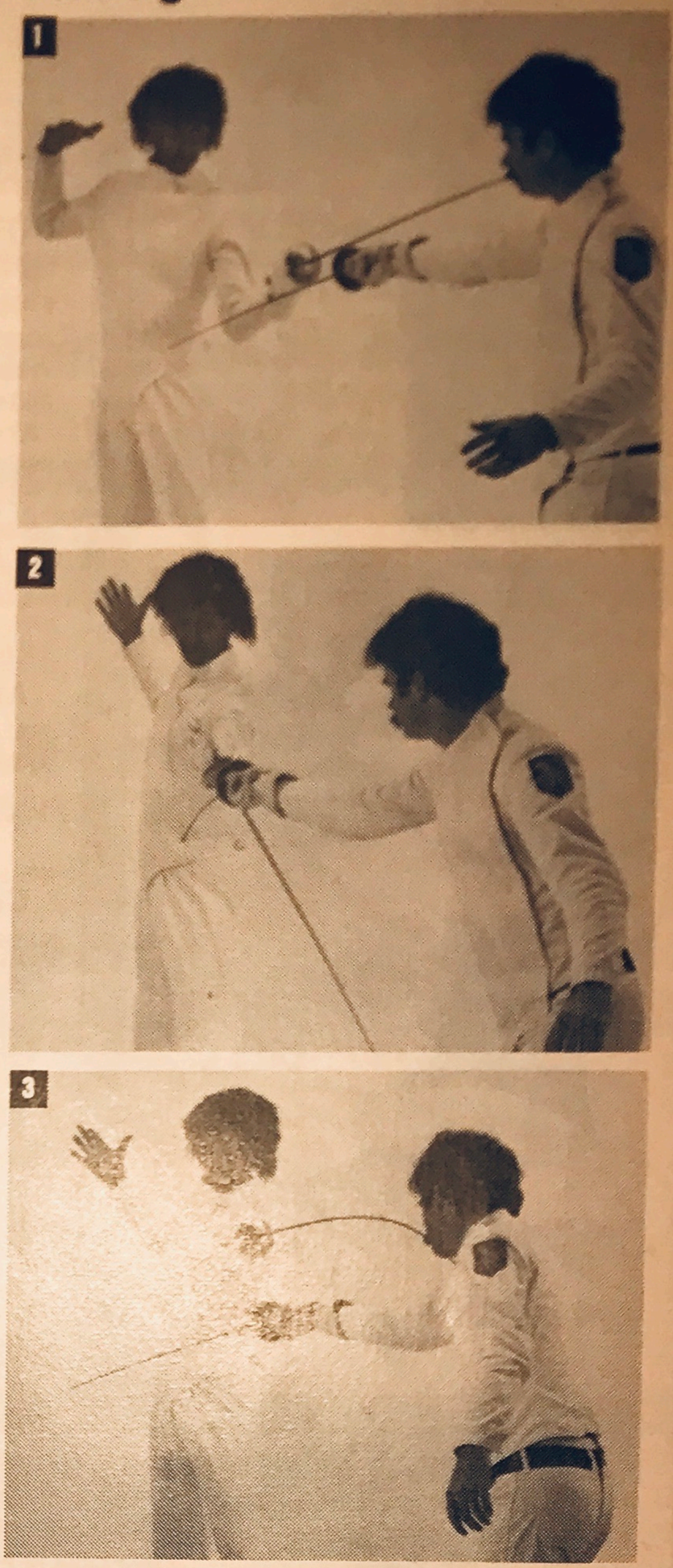
One possible scenario: Your opponent feints ahead of his attack. But you fail to follow the feint. Since his action was not convincing, you watch for the real attack. Having failed to provoke a reaction, the attacker feints again, and again, and again, never launching a real thrust. Realizing what is happening, you time your response, and, as one feint is about to blend into another — **zap** — with a simple, straight action you nail your flat-footed adversary. Determined to force you to react, he was not relaxed enough to switch into defensive thinking and save himself.

JKD



From the on-guard position (1), the fighter on the right attacks "low-outside" (2). The fighter on the left parries the attack. Having deflected the attack, the fighter on the left ripostes (3) with his right arm, using his left to maintain the check on his opponent's weapon.

Fencing



In the fencing application of this same move (1), the fencer on the right attacks "low-inside." The fencer on the left parries the attack (2), deflecting it away from the target. Having pushed the attack aside (3), the fencer on the left attacks, repostes into the open line and scores.

A fighter who can successfully attack on his opponent's preparation takes control of the bout. He disrupts his adversary's timing and shakes his confidence.

The Nature of Attacks

Another element of fencing that fits the combat universality Bruce Lee was seeking involves "simple" or "compound" attacks.

Simple attacks can be classified as either "direct" or "indirect." A direct action is one movement, in one line (high to high, low to low). Indirect simple attacks change line, but are still a single action. It may start out "high inside" and arrive "low outside." These are not feints, but rather single actions moving across lines of engagement. In fencing these are called "disengagements," "cut overs," "cut unders," "verticals," and "diagonals." JKD also uses these terms.

Compound attacks use more than one action as part of the attack. These actions may include feints, attacks against the opponent's weapon and second intentions.

A second intention is a well-executed attack that the attacker allows to be parried by his opponent. At the same time he ensures, usually by virtue of distance, his safety from a simple riposte. The purpose is to inspire an instantaneous relaxation which is prevalent when a fighter fails an attack. But as the opponent pauses, however so briefly — **boom** — the attack resumes, perhaps even the same attack in the same place (a "reprise"), this time finding its target.

As Bruce's understanding grew, he began to pick up the threads running through his learning. As JKD took on a form, he identified five routes, or ways of attack. While never claiming these were the only avenues open, they allowed him to start seeing how the pieces fit together into the wholeness of fighting.

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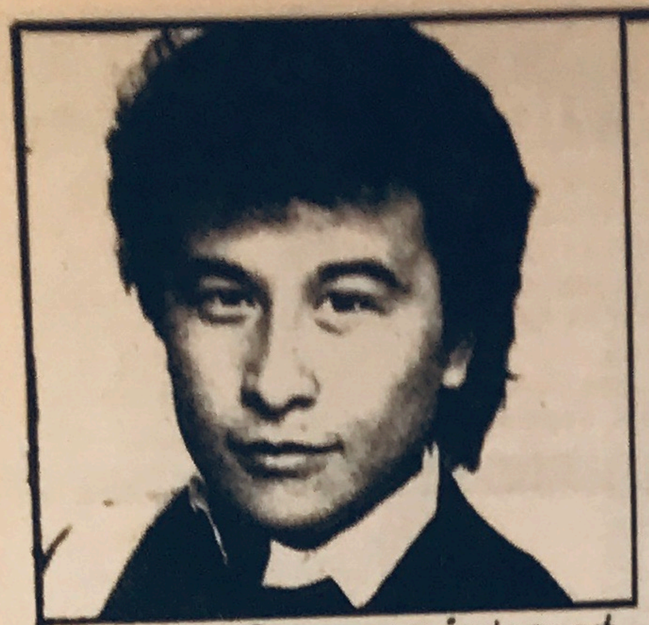

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Jeet Kune Do

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Here's how fencing relates to JKD's method of attack:

JKD's Method of Attack	Fencing Element
Simple angular attack	Simple attack — direct Simple attack — indirect
Hand Immobilization Attack	Stop hit — Time hit Compound attacks
Progressive Indirect Attack	Feints Attacks against weapons
Attacks by combination	Compound attacks Second Intentions
Attacks by drawing	Feints

Through his mastery of the fighting arts, Bruce Lee was not afraid to study new ways and ideas, even those that had hundreds of years of tradition. He knew there were many paths to the truth and encouraged his students to explore all roads, paved and unpaved. From Western boxing and wing chun, to French savate and Chinese and Korean kicking styles, from grappling and the use of knees and elbows in Thai boxing, to Filipino kali and European fencing, Lee considered every art a learning experience.

A hallmark of Bruce's development was his willingness to challenge and change, his understanding of truth. Rather than chain himself to one system, he walked where there were no established reference points, and thereby exhibited a courage far beyond anything imaginable in modern martial arts circles. His cryptic statement that a JKD fighter has "no style as style, no limit as limitation" both puzzles and inspires his current followers.

He possessed a rare combination of courage and curiosity, the byproduct of which is a richer life for all martial artists.

About the Author: David Scyster is a Charlotte, North Carolina-based fencing student and teacher. He also has been studying jeet kune do and kali for more than a year.